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History and Real People

Curator Rosemary Donegan challenges the way exhibitions, and history, are experienced

BY NANCY TOUSLEY



“Paintings tell certain types of stories. There are other stories they never tell”

Rosemary Donegan was commissioned to curate *Work, Weather and the Grid: Agriculture in Saskatchewan* by the Dunlop Art Gallery as its contribution to The Regina Work Project last summer. According to Peter White, then director of the Dunlop and now director of the Mendel Art Gallery where the exhibition was seen from July 27 to September 8, Donegan was the natural choice to do the show.

Labour and a particular consideration of place have been constant themes in her work.

The Toronto-based independent curator grew up in Swift Current in the 1950s and took her BFA at the University of Saskatchewan before going on to the University of Toronto for an MA in the history of art. Donegan has worked in public art galleries and museums; film; city planning and urban design; installation, exhibition and poster design;

and publishing. Her association with the Canadian labour movement through art, archival and educational projects goes back to 1979. But it was two of Donegan's earlier exhibitions that contributed most directly to *Work, Weather and the Grid*. The first, *Spadina Avenue: A Photohistory* (mounted at A Space in 1984), looked at the architectural, cultural and social history of Toronto's great avenue through an installation designed to emulate the streetscape. Then, in her touring show *Industrial Images/Images Industrielles* (Art Gallery of Hamilton, 1987) Donegan examined the industrial vision of Canada in the first half of the 20th century, not only through painting and sculpture but by looking at visual popular culture as well.

In organizing *Work, Weather and the Grid*, Donegan developed an idiosyncratic installation design that would allow the interaction of images and objects drawn from a wide range of sources. The materials included documentary photography, advertising, posters, prints, postcards, maps, periodical illustration, certificates, models, films, as well as sculpture and painting by both professional and

PORTRAIT PHOTOGRAPHY PAUL ORENSTEIN

untrained artists. The result was an exhibition that gave a full overview of agriculture in Saskatchewan from the 1880s, when the surveyor's sectional grid was imposed on the landscape, to the advent of the agricultural industry in the 1950s. Paintings occupied the upper reaches of the walls, with the largest at the top. At the Mendel, pride of place went to William Perchudoff's four huge 1953 murals depicting meat processing at Saskatoon's Intercontinental Packers Limited. Below was a tier of smaller paintings ranging from Edward Roper's 1887 watercolor *Breaking Prairie in July, N.W.T., Canada* to Inglis Sheldon-Williams' 1923 *The Fireguard or Prairie Fire* to Jan Wyers' *These Good Old Threshing Days* of 1955. On the next tier, black and white photographs ran around the room in a band positioned at eye level. Below them, a continuous ledge designed by Donegan offered the graphic arts on shelves tilted upwards for comfortable viewing. Three-dimensional objects, including H.M. Chappell's 1948 model of a Massey-Harris tractor (made of wood, sewing machine parts, ash trays and canning jar rings), were displayed in pedestal cases. Outside the gallery, three historical documentary films ran continuously.

By putting fine art and popular culture on an equal footing and making the public art gallery their common ground, Donegan created a remarkable exhibition. Rosemary Donegan talked to Nancy Tousley, who saw the exhibition at the Mendel.

Tousley: Did you have models for planning *Work, Weather and the Grid*?

Donegan: The noteworthy things — the types of materials and the method of installation — came out of learning from other projects I had done, particularly *Spadina Avenue*. But the Saskatchewan show also evolved from the problems you have when you take paintings and advertising and photography and put them together. When I started the research, I kept going back to myself: "Well, what am I going to do with this? How am I going to select the best paint-

ings?" It became clear that some of the best paintings — in traditional fine art terms — weren't necessarily the most interesting ones. Then, when I got into the photographic research, what became interesting was that what *doesn't* get photographed is just as important as what *does*; the omissions are often as significant as the inclusions. Paintings tell certain types of stories. There are other stories they never tell. Photography also gives you particular ways, both technically and in its interpretive viewpoint, of looking at the world. Advertising gives you another way; the intent and the technology of the medium really affect what comes out of it. Trying to bring all those things into play, to rub off each other in a number of ways, was what I got really interested in.

What made *Work, Weather and the Grid* such an exciting experience for me was the fact that it wasn't linear. It had many layers. Things spoke to each other across the room.

When you're doing this kind of research you're finding this and you're finding that; there's a kind of energy you get when you bounce off different kinds of information. Trying to draw that complexity into the exhibition was a fascinating problem. I think it worked, but it worked because the exhibition was designed to involve the people who came to it, and they all came to it with things they already knew. Many people who saw the exhibition know much more about the practice of agriculture in Saskatchewan over the last 50 years than I'm ever going to know. They bring that information with them and weave it into the things I have brought together. What was really exciting, also, about being in the exhibition and listening to people was hearing that "Oh, I remember when...." A picture triggers their imagination and takes them off somewhere, and then

Below:
Cliff Humes
Working model of a Case tractor
20.4 x 18 x 40.5 in.
Photo: Brenda Pelkey
Collection: Western Development
Museum, Saskatoon
Courtesy: Mendel Art Gallery

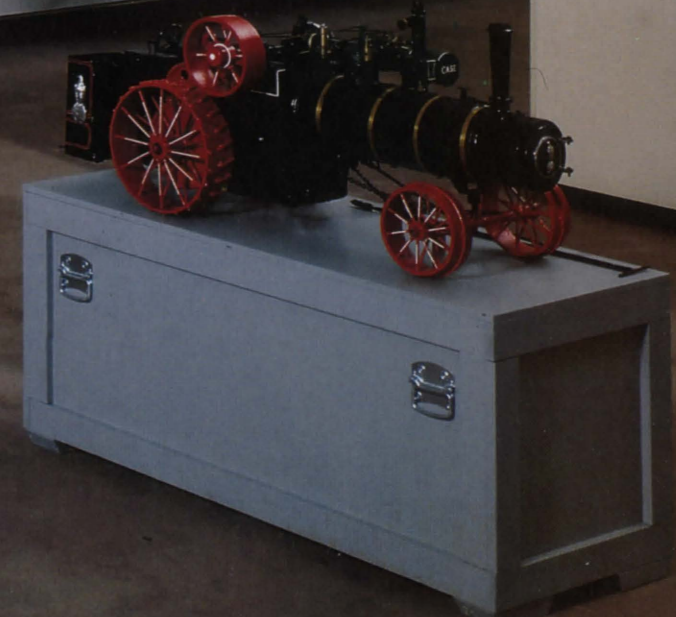


“The exhibition was designed to involve the people who came to it”



DEEP FALL PLOUGH
GRASSHOPPERS
SASKATCHEWAN DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE
1934

ANGER
HANDLE WITH CARE
In 1925
SASKATCHEWAN FARM SAFETY WEEK
1925-1926
Farm Canada 1974



Work, Weather and the Grid: Agriculture in Saskatchewan.
Installation view, Dunlop Art Gallery, May 1991
Includes Fritz Brandtner *Untitled (Horses in the Cypress Hills)* 1933
Oil and canvas mural 45 in. x 40 ft. 2 in.
Photo: Patricia Holdsworth
Courtesy: Dunlop Art Gallery

they reconnect to another photograph down the line. They don't actually see every photograph. I put a discreet sign in the gallery saying, "One does not have to read all the information in this exhibition," because sometimes people feel obliged to consume everything and I think it's more interesting to move through it, to go back and to go forward.

The key to making it work was the installation: coming up with that notion of how to integrate the different materials so that they each had their own space to survive in.

It struck me, looking at the show, that you took advantage of the fact that we have learned to leap gaps in information.

Yes, I feel strongly that people who come to exhibitions, even though they might not be sophisticated art patrons, are very sophisticated visually. These people watch TV; they hop stations.

How did you arrive at the installation design?

The idea for the installation came to me in a flash. That sounds corny but I'd been working with all this stuff and I kept thinking, "What am I going to do?" How do you put a 40-foot painting beside a four-inch photograph?

I heard that part of the design concept came out of the way turn-of-the-century agricultural fairs were installed.

I looked for documentation of the fairs. I *had* to go to the Swift Current rodeo. And I was remembering my own experiences as a child of going to the fair, even if it was just the art display in the craft room. There was a little bench around the room for the handiwork and the pictures went up on the wall and the cakes were at one end. Things like that.

What is the basis of your practice? Your work seems to be very much in line with the new thinking

about art history.

I've been trying to deal with two things that come out of the work of the British feminist art historian Griselda Pollock. In her writing she talks about how art represents the general culture around us and depicts it in a number of ways. But the other thing she deals with, almost simultaneously, is the fact that culture also produces meaning in its own right. Part of how farmers see themselves is shaped by the photographs and the pictures they have seen of themselves. So looking at imagery in its entire visual range is looking at how it both constructs meaning and reflects meaning. The other thing I'm interested in is the multi-narrative of how history evolves. For example, the history of architecture in Toronto evolved in relationship to the development of industry, to the development of neighbourhoods, and to a whole series of other cultural developments — it's not just the straight architectural history of buildings. So when I started working on agriculture, I was trying to deal with it both at the level of the individual farmer and at the industrial level, to integrate the two; Saskatchewan agriculture is industrialized.

Did you work with a story line? That's a lot of information to organize.

Well, my story line was and is history. There is a native history of Saskatchewan agriculture; there is a history of machinery in agriculture; there is a history of landscape painting. I'm trying to interweave them. But the problem with an exhibition like this, as I've mentioned, is how to bring out the things we have omitted from our history.

How do you work that out? By searching diligently until you find the right thing?

Yes. If I can't find photographs or paintings that deal with important subjects, I look for other material that will at least raise the issues. So, for example, in *Work, Weather and the Grid*, I have included petitions from women who were trying to get rights to homestead. They are not visual elements: they're textual elements. But I

Cyrus Cuneo
An Early Scottish Settler on his Self-binder (c. 1918)
 Oil on canvas, 8 ft. 9 in. x 7 ft. 9 in.
 Photo: Brenda Pelkey
 Collection: Hotel Saskatchewan, Regina
 Courtesy: Mendel Art Gallery



“The way farmers see themselves is shaped by the pictures they have seen of themselves”

could make the point with documentary information, which I think is stronger than me writing about it.

Your concept of “visual history” — is it a term you coined?

I'm not sure I made it up, but I've found it helpful to describe what I do. I started to find the title of “art historian” very specific and limiting. I think visual history starts to capture the notion that people in all cultures at all times have made pictures. And, because I'm really interested in popular culture and have been affected by recent debates in cultural studies, this idea allows me to work with popular culture *and* with the fine arts. I don't want to drop the fine arts any more than I want to drop magazine illustration. They're very interrelated, but they get artificially separated, which I don't think they are in people's experience. In *Work, Weather and the Grid*, you can see that the advertising images continue all the way through. They take different forms but they are as integral to the image of agriculture as the sod hut.

Photography plays an interesting role in this show. For many people, it will be the place where reality lies, partly because you see the sod huts, the kids without shoes, and evidence of the hardships of farm labour. Other photographs are as Edenic as some of the paintings. Photography's indexical relationship to the real world gives these images a powerful impact.

There's an inherent problem with contrasting photography and, let's say, painting, because in an exhibition like *Work, Weather and the Grid*, the photography almost becomes, “Okay, this is social documentary. This is the hard-core reality and everything else is a myth.” The problem is that photography has its own omissions as much as painting does. Yes, it is *closer* to representing reality, but it is not the only truth. It's a constructed truth.

Being conscious of that, did you approach photography in a particular way? Were you looking for varied kinds of photos, like those wonderful panoramas showing clouds piled high in the sky and people standing knee-deep in wheat

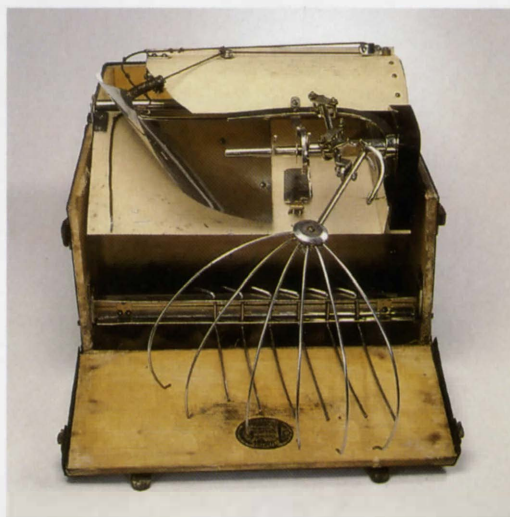
on a sunny day? They contrast strongly with the Dirty Thirties photographs and the bleak winter scenes.

The reality of research in photography is that while there are a lot of paintings that say what it was like on the prairies, the number of photographs — God, there are millions! The problem is, how do you deal with the volume? A very traditional definition of a quality photograph — good photographs you can read, that you can see people's faces in — is the first thing you're always looking for. Then it's a process of sorting for what tells you a story you wouldn't get any other way. What is photography constructing about that reality? One thing would be those classic images of fecundity in the wheat field. You don't find them in any other medium.

Visual history is connected for me with the vividness of visual memory. As a viewer, it's possible to take in a great deal of information because it is visual information. Does that enter into your thinking?

Yes. I'm trying to recreate for the audience the excitement I feel when I'm researching the show. I think this exhibition has had such a strong response because there are so many points of access for people of different ages, different backgrounds. I'm trying to lead people into it through their own interests. For me, it's important that the people in these pictures are real people. Most of the people in the photographs were identified by name. They're not “a group of farmers”; they're real people who are farmers. I just had a letter from Frank Harding, who is a three-year-old feeding chickens in one of the photographs, which he hadn't seen in 60 years. That specificity is my attempt to say history is about real people; it's not about generalities. **GA**

Paul Gerlach
Sheaf Carrying Attachment (Patent Model) 1921
16 x 9 x 15 in.
Photo: Patricia Holdsworth
Collection: Western Development
Museum, Saskatoon



“I think the show was strong because there were so many points of access”